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The Chronicles of ROBIN HOOD



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I

How Robert of Locksley became Robin of Barnesdale

T was high summer in Barnesdale Forest, and the broad fans of the oak and chestnut trees were massed into thick layers of shade through which the sunshine splashed here and there in blots and dapplings of gold. The green deer-path which wandered northward through the trees was so narrow and faint that in places it all but disappeared beneath the undergrowth of hazel, dogwood, and wayfaring-trees; and where the tangle fell back a little, leaving a clear space, the rabbits who had their burrows beneath the roots of the forest trees were scampering and thumping on the open turf. The warm noontide

hush was broken only by the hum of a myriad insects, and the distant calling of a cuckoo, and the soft whispers of sound as the wild things came and went about their own affairs.

But presently the peace of the forest was broken. A jay screamed in sudden warning, a squirrel darted up the trunk of a great beech tree, paused for a moment, chittering with rage as he peered down round one of the lower branches, and disappeared. The scampering rabbits were gone, with wildly bobbing scuts, into their holes, and the little track was left deserted; but not for long.

A man was coming between the boles of the trees, where none but the wild boar or the fallow doe with her fawns ever passed from year's end to year's end. On he came up the track, striding along as boldly as though he were a king's forester. But he was no forester, though his woollen tunic was of Lincoln green and he carried a seven-foot bow-stave in his hand. He was a tall man, slightly built, and seemingly about three-and-twenty years of age, with a thin, pleasant face, and eyes which seemed very blue against the berry-brownness of his skin. The hood of his green capuchin lay back on his shoulders and his dark hair curled crisply from beneath a close cap of velvet in which a curlew's wing-feather was stuck at a jaunty angle. His tunic was belted round the waist by a broad leathern girdle, in the right side of which was stuck a long Irish hunting dagger, and at his left hip hung a quiver with six grey goose-feathered deer-bolts.

Quietly he threaded the mazy woodland ways, neither dawdling nor making any attempt at speed. And behind him the rabbits stole from their burrows, the squirrel scampered down to the root of his tree, where he had left a nut, and the life of the forest went on again as though he had never passed that way; and before him as he went another screaming jay or clucking blackbird would cry its warning to the wilderness.

On and on he went, through darkling thickets where every shadow might be a lurking wolf, across wide sunlit clearings where the rose-purple spires of the foxgloves pointed toward the sky and the elder trees were curded with blossom. Once he made a wide half-circle to avoid startling a herd of roe-deer who were feeding in a glade, and once he paused to cup the water of a little stream in his hands and drink, and again to follow with his eyes the bobbing flight of a green woodpecker. There were several hours of daylight left, and he was in no hurry; and as he loped along through the forest ways his thoughts were pleasantly divided between the village of Locksley, where he had been staying for two weeks, and his own farm, to which he was now returning. He and his forefathers had farmed Goddethorne for generations, holding it at a rental from the monks of St. Mary's Abbey at York; but he himself had spent much of his boyhood with his Uncle Stephen, who farmed his own land on the borders of Locksley Chase, and because of this he was generally called Robert of Locksley, though his native village was Birkencar, near Pomfret.

Robert of Locksley had been back to the village of his name for three reasons: firstly, on the business of the farm; secondly, to visit his uncle and the friends of his boyhood; and thirdly, to see Marian.

Marian was the daughter of Robert, Lord Fitzwater, of Malaset; whereas Robert of Locksley was only a yeoman, and not a rich one either, and he knew that he

would never be allowed to marry her. But they loved each other, and had done so ever since they had first met in Locksley Chase, ten summers ago. She had been only nine years old then, and as she grew older it was Robert who had taught her to ride and to fly her hawk (and Robert, too, who had taught her to use sword and buckler, though the older folk had known nothing of that). And ever since he had come north to take on Goddethorne after his father's death, Robert—or Robin as he was often named—had returned to Locksley from time to time, walking the twenty miles through the forest and twenty miles back again, to see Marian and make sure that she had not forgotten him.

When he had left her that morning he had been sorry, because it would be a long time before he could be with her again, but with every mile that he drew nearer to Goddethorne his heart lightened because he was going home after a fortnight's absence. Hay harvest would be in full swing, he thought, and he began to make plans for having the corn-barn re-thatched, and to wonder whether, if he was very careful through the winter, he could afford to buy another yoke of oxen next spring. Sibby, the wife of one of his villeins, would have spread fresh rushes on the floor of his one-roomed farm-house, and there would be mutton-fat candles glimmering on the side chest, and something savoury for supper, and Trusty, the cattle-dog, would come barking across the fields to welcome him home.

It was evening when he crossed the Pomfret road and headed down-hill through the last tongue of Barnesdale Forest, towards Birkencar, and the warm rays of the setting sun slanted far between the tree trunks, sending long lances of hazy gold to mingle with the crowding shadows of the forest behind him.

Robert of Locksley quickened his pace as he reached the last home-stretch of the long tramp; but a little way from the forest verge he halted abruptly as a small brownclad figure started out from the shadow of a tree beside the bank and came running up-hill towards him, gesturing him back towards the forest depths as it ran.

'Much, lad, is something wrong?' asked Robin, as the little man drew close; and received the breathless reply:

'Back, Master Robin! Get back to the forest while there is still time!'

'And why, friend Much?'

'Because you have been away too long. Guy of Gisborne has borne false witness against you while you were gone, swearing that you had shot the king's deer. Only yesterday you were proclaimed outlaw and wolfshead from the steps of Pomfret Market Cross, and this morning the abbot's cut-throats came, with Guy of Gisborne himself at their head, to take possession of Goddethorne; and they are there now, waiting for you to come back.'

'And so you came to warn me?' said Robin. 'Good little Much.' And he put his hand gently on the shoulder of Much the miller's son, and stood looking away past him to where the last rays of the sunset were dying out among the crowding tree trunks. He knew that the Abbot of St. Mary's hated him because he had never scrupled to speak plainly his opinion of the fat churchman and his ways, and he knew also that the abbot had long coveted his little farm with its rich corn and pasture, desiring to add it to the abbey lands but unable to do so as long as he paid his rent—for it was the law that a socman could

not have the land he rented taken from him so long as his rent was regularly paid, but was free to hold it himself and leave it to his son after him, just as he would if the land were his own. But an outlaw had no rights, and he, Robert of Locksley, would not be the first honest man whose life Guy of Gisborne, the abbot's steward, had sworn away for his fat master's gain.

'Fool that I was to stay so long away,' he said bitterly at last. 'I suppose they swore that I had fled from justice? They did that to poor John Kierslake last year, as I remember.' And he dropped his hand from Much's shoulder, and demanded: 'What has become of my villeins?'

'They have been flogged, and now they lie bound hand and foot in the corn-barn, and to-morrow they go before the Justice in Doncaster, to lose their right hands because they tried to defend your property with stones and farm tools.'

'Did they?' said Robin, and his voice was very kind. 'Good lads. Good, foolish, faithful lads.' And he began to string his bow. 'Are you coming with me?' he asked, turning his face once more towards open country.

Much whipped round and scurried after him. 'Master Robin, you're never going down into that hornets' nest? Do you not understand—?'

'I understand that my poor villeins are in pain and peril because they kept faith with me,' Robin said grimly. 'So now I am going to keep faith with them.' And he strode on, Much half-running to keep up with him.

As they passed the tree under which the little man had been hiding, he darted aside from the track and returned a moment later, carrying a strung bow and four long arrows which he stuck into his belt. Robin glanced down at them with raised brows, and Much said in explanation: 'I thought maybe you would let me go with you and be free in the Greenwood, for I am weary of living in bondage; and besides—two bows are better than one when there is fighting in the wind.'

Robin made no reply; he halted beside the trunk of a great ash tree on the forest verge, and leaned forward with one hand on the grey bark, and looked down into the bowl of the valley below him. From where he stood the waste land dropped away gently to the three great fields of Goddethorne, with the farm buildings in their midst, then rose again to Birkencar Village, which lay—its one long street and little squat church half hidden behind a spinney of birch and rowan—half-way up the

farther slope.

The farm was compact and self-contained and beautiful within its encircling quick-set hedge—a low hedge, because the law forbade any man holding land on the verge of a Royal forest to grow his hedges high enough to keep the does and their fawns out of the standing corn. One of the fields was down to roots; in the second the cut hay lay in long silvery swathes; in the third the wheat was tall, and green as jade. The farm steading, built in a square with no break save a gate of heavy weathersilvered timbers on the forest side, squatted close to the earth, round an open garth in the middle. Like the great mulberry tree behind it, it looked as though it had grown out of the land in the course of centuries; houseplace and stable, cow-byres and corn-barn and cart-linhay, walled with grey stone and roofed with warm brown bracken-thatch. The huts of the four farm villeins were brown-thatched too, and squatted very comfortably among their little bean-patches and herb-plots, between the farm and the forest.

Robin's eyes moved quickly over the peaceful scene, and his heart was sore, for he loved Goddethorne; but there was scant time for vain regrets. From his post on the forest verge he could look right down into the distant garth, and there he saw figures that moved idly about, and one that lounged before the door of the corn-barn.

'Are they bolted in?' he demanded, without looking

round.

'No,' replied Much. 'They are bound hand and foot, and the abbot's men have set a guard over them-or that was how it was when I came that way a few hours ago, and played the gaping half-wit for those devils' benefit!' And he laughed quietly as he remembered how he had tricked the swaggering men-at-arms into thinking him a harmless poke-my-nose.

'Good!' said Robin. 'That will make our task the lighter.' And so saying he moved off with quick, soundless steps, along the woodshore towards a thicket of hazel and young trees which stretched down to the very boundary of the hay-field. And Much went after him, wondering as he had often done before at the uncanny silence and swiftness with which the tall man passed among the tangled wilderness of goat-willow, elder, and traveller's-joy without so much as the rustle of a leaf or the snap of a broken twig to mark his passing.

Only a few yards from where the thicket finally came to an end there rose an ancient thorn tree forming the end of a long hawthorn wind-break. Robin paused a moment among the hazel bushes, looking quickly from side to side; then he stepped out on to the open turf.

Much sped after him like a small, faithful shadow, and a moment later the two were crouching in the dry ditch in the lee of the wind-break. They went down it, bent double, with the thick-leaved hawthorn hedge between them and the steading, to the place where a narrow gap in the wind-break gave access to the bean-patch beyond. Once among the tall, tendrilled bean-plants they were safe from observation, with cover right up to the wall of the linhay and the barn beside it.

There was a window high in the linhay wall. It was only a lancet window, made for defence, like the arrowslits in the outer walls of the cow-byres and the farmhouse itself; but this particular window had been enlarged a little for some purpose long since forgotten, and although it was narrow, it was long. Robin had wriggled through it often in his boyhood days, and he was fairly sure that he could do so now. He pointed it out to Much in the fading light, and stooped down.

'Climb on to my shoulders,' he whispered, 'and I'll

raise you up so that you can get in.'

Much looked doubtfully up at the narrow window, but did as Robin bade him; and as soon as he was high enough he grasped the stone sill and drew himself up, and contrived to wriggle through into the hay-loft which formed

the upper story of the linhay.

Robin handed up both bows, and then himself leaped for the sill. His hands gripped on the rough stones and his raw-hide shoes were soundless against the wall as he scrabbled for a well-remembered foothold and drew himself up. He had broadened more than he knew since last he came that way, and for one moment it seemed that he would not be able to force his way through; but he did

it at last, sideways, with his head screwed down on his shoulder and one leg left behind, and pitched down headforemost on to a pile of fodder inside. And as he picked himself up, he knew that no matter what happened he would not be able to retreat by the way he had come.

Much was kneeling against the wall, and Robin gestured to him to remain where he was; then, holding a loose truss of hay before his head, he began to worm his way forward towards the open end of the loft. Inch by inch he wriggled forward, until he could look down over the edge of the rough floor and see the whole farm garth below him. The dusk was rising between the old walls, and the saffron flicker of mingled fire- and candle-light showed warm and welcoming through the windows of the house-place.

Sounds of coarse revelry splurged forth from those windows, for Sir Guy of Gisborne and the abbot's men were making themselves at home on Robin's beef and home-brewed perry, and he frowned as he listened to the uproar. The fading light was just strong enough to show him the whipping-post which had been set up close to the gate, with the ropes still lying beside it, and the figure of a man-at-arms who lounged before the barn door—and Trusty. Trusty lay in the light of the house-place window, with his head twisted at an unnatural angle over a dark stain where his blood had soaked into the beaten earth.

Robin remained very still for a long time, looking at the body of his faithful friend, and it seemed to him that the death of his dog stood for all the injustice and oppression that was rife in the land. And his rage began to sing within him as an arrow sings in flight; he wanted to leap down into the garth and shout to the devils in his house to come out and fight; he wanted to kill every one of them as they had killed his dog. But he knew that he could not do that now; he was there to get his villeins away from the fate in store for them, and the abbot's men would have to wait for another day. But as he began to worm his way back towards the rear of the linhay he swore in his heart that day should come, and that henceforth his hand was against them and their kind, and the fat churchmen who were their masters, and the cruel lords who were as bad as the churchmen—because of the thing that they had done to Trusty and were doing to England.

A few moments later he was beside Much in the shadows, whispering his plan into the little man's ear. For a short time they lay in silence, until the blue dusk at the open end of the linhay was deep enough to make it unlikely for any movement in the garth outside to catch the eye of the carousers in the house-place. Then Robin reached out and touched his companion, and they

began to creep forward.

The man outside the barn door was growing restive and wanted his supper. He kept on turning to look at the lighted windows, muttering angrily under his breath; and it was in one of these moments, when his back was turned, that Robin leaped down from his hiding-place. The man heard the soft thud of landing feet behind him, but before he could turn or cry out Robin was upon him. There was no struggle as Robin slipped the knife blade cleanly under his ribs, and the man-at-arms collapsed with a grunt.

Next moment Much had dropped both bows into the driest part of the midden, where they would make no clatter on landing, and leaped down to join him.

'The barn door—quick! You have your knife!' Robin hissed, and as the little man sped to raise the heavy latch, he picked up his bow from its resting-place, and, fitting an arrow to the string, turned to face the farm-house. If anyone should come out, the candle-lit window would silhouette them for a moment and give him a mark to shoot at.

Behind him in the darkness of the barn he heard a faint whisper and a groan, and then soft footsteps over the threshing floor; and it seemed to him that Much and the other villeins were making enough noise to rouse the half-mile-distant village itself. But there came no hush in the thick babble of voices beyond the lighted windows, and no figure appeared in the doorway. And now the four villeins were beside him, like shadows in the dusk, and Much was already running for the gate.

There was a tiny grating sound as the heavy bar was lifted and the bolts drawn back; but Robin did not turn his head. He was moving backwards towards the now open gate, with his eyes on the flickering golden window-squares that had so recently meant home to him, and his arrow still nocked to his bowstring. Then the tall gate-timbers were on either side of them, and the next moment they were all outside, and Much, aided by one of the other villeins, was silently closing the gate and jamming it with the bar, which he had thoughtfully brought out with him for the purpose.

A few moments later Robin spoke to his five followers crouching in the ditch beyond the wind-break. 'Listen, lads. You all have bows hidden under your pallets. Oh yes, I know you have. Go and get them. Get any other tools or weapons you have in your huts—food—anything